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## Psychogeography in a Time of Calamity –Deriving with Defoe

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**Abstract:** This paper responds to the ECRM Call for Papers by discussing and assessing the value of a co-articulation of two research approaches, that of psychogeography and the use of fictional writing, particularly novels, as a basis for business and management research. It examines Daniel Defoe's novel *A Journal of the Plague Year* as the prototypical psychogeographical text and a model of the *dérive*. In doing so it explores the opportunities and problems of using fiction to understand complex current phenomena. This enables us to further the case for psychogeographical exploration or the *dérive* as a research method which is well established as a literary genre and which contributes to new understandings of the limits of management and organization theory.

We draw parallels between the London Great Plague of 1665 which exposed the contrasting mobility of the rich and poor when calamity strikes, the problems of balancing the private and public good, the challenge of providing employment when businesses have closed and other consequences of urban disaster and how these can help us analyse the impact of such modern day disasters as 9/11, the Global Financial Crisis, climate change, and the world-wide refugee crisis. Through repeated forays (*dérives*) into the plague-ridden streets of London, the narrator of *A Journal of the Plague Year* illustrates the limits of 'management thinking'. In the light of current claims that we have reached ecological limits in the 'global village' and the apparent widespread breakdown of social order in many parts of the world, the research approach adopted here has the potential to illuminate our current condition.

Given this condition, the need to transcend current frames of reference and the necessity to innovate according to the situation includes innovation in research approaches. To the best of our knowledge the co-articulation of psychogeography and fiction has not yet been tested. Treating *A Journal of the Plague Year* as our 'case study' we are able to argue for the *dérive* as a useful and productive research method that illuminates different aspects of organizational life, as well as the larger context of our organizations. We also contribute to the growing body of work that uses fiction to extend management theory.

**Keywords:** *dérive*, psychogeography, qualitative research methods, Defoe

## 1. Introduction

This paper responds to the ECRM 2016 Call for Papers by demonstrating the co-articulation of two research approaches. Our discussion is informed both by previous work which introduces a psychogeographical approach to business and management research (Hindley et al, 2015; Knowles, 2008; 2009) and by the growing tradition of examining the experience found in fictional works as a valid research method (De Cock and Land, 2005; Rhodes and Brown, 2005). It provides an opportunity to discuss and assess the value of the psychogeographical approach to researching in the business and management field and to “reframe” it within the action and landscape of a novel. This project combines the use of fiction as a source of data with psychogeography by returning to the “prototype psychogeographical report” (Coverley, 2010:15) - Defoe's 1722 novel *A Journal of the Plague Year* about London's Great Plague of 1665 (1722/2003). Defoe's protagonist-narrator, H.F. takes the reader on a walk, in psychogeographical terms a *dérive*, around the plague-stricken city of London in 1665 showing us the full horror of this calamity. The individuals whom we meet are bound together in organizations: businesses, occupations, social classes, families, and most of all, the large city. The problems faced by the city are political, economic and social and the attempts by ‘city management’ to manage them provides a foil for assessing our current managerial capacity. That however is not the purpose of this paper. Our purpose is to demonstrate the co-articulation of psychogeography and fiction.

## 2. Psychogeography

The inductive, psychogeographical research approach is rooted in a long-established literary tradition. Iain Sinclair (e.g. 2003a; 2003b; 2015) and Will Self (e.g. 2007) are prominent current proponents who write non-fiction works and newspaper columns discussing their observations. Although it has been considered as a research approach in business and management (Hindley et al, 2015; Knowles, 2008; 2009), it has not so far been applied to research questions in this field. Its constituent elements are academic disciplines rooted in real world experience. Psychology provides explanations of the workings of the mind and the geographical element encompasses the (urban) environment, geology (usually seen in a metaphorical sense), economics and so on (Debord, 1955). Its major tool is the *dérive*, during which apparently serendipitous data are gathered. The method constitutes ‘strolling’ along a route in order to observe the environment and to construct meanings by (for example) watching behaviour; looking at displayed images and reading texts; talking to people met in a variety of ways – including formally arranged interviews - and layering this experience over a number of visits with earlier relevant literature on the area (Hindley et al, 2015; Knowles, 2008; see also Sinclair, 2003a for examples of formally arranged interviews in psychogeography). Defoe, in his “prototype” (Coverley, 2010:15) refers explicitly to the contemporary weekly “Bill of Mortality” which provides an objective measure of the progress of the Plague (Defoe, 1722/2003:4 and *passim*).

In some instances a particular question has been formulated in advance, such as Sinclair's (2003a) aim to discover graffiti, with the objective of documenting the signature “tags”. In others the found “data” are composed into a “story”. The practice explicitly includes the search for new methods of “apprehending our urban environment” (Coverley, 2010:13). Given the pervasive nature of management in cities, new methods apprehending our urban environment would undoubtedly serve the search for new methods of management inquiry.

There are many methodological resonances between the ‘report’ of a *dérive* and research accounts. The elements of an academic research report are seen very clearly as Self and Sinclair layer the new learning from their observations with previous readings (literature review), engage the people they meet in dialogue (interviews), analyse signage and notices (secondary data) whilst discussing their own activities in great detail. The writing-up of psychogeographical work, which often consists of epic walks such as Self's (2007) from London to Manhattan including a flight from Heathrow, and Sinclair's (2003b) around London's orbital motorway, usually gives the initial impression that all data have been collected in a single walk in which time has been “allowed to unravel at its own speed” (Sinclair, 2002:7). However, much as in most academic writing in which the research activity takes place in a quite different order from the logical structure of the text, it is clear that psychogeographical walks are undertaken in stages, that sometimes the same ground is covered, and that supporting information may be added both before and after the actual *dérive* (see for example Self, 2007 and Sinclair, 2003b). Thus we “reframe” a

method which has an established history in one field of endeavour in order to address business research issues.

There is also another reason for our analysis of *The Journal of a Plague Year*. There are many novels of dystopias, but *The Journal of a Plague Year* is unique in that it pretends to be a real account of real events, but of course, whilst the events are real, the accounting is not. The fictional strategies of novelists have long been deployed by lobbyists and spin doctors and that includes the authors of annual company reports and the authors of economic and social reports that underpin political policies. Unravelling the tricks of presentation requires research nous. Introducing the analysis of fiction to business researchers might develop it.

Yet another rationale for focussing on a city in crisis is the sense of contemporaneity. It is common knowledge that the city is a prime site for playing out the crises of globalization. The rate of urbanization and increasing inequality and the stress on infrastructure lead to what Jane Jacobs (2005) called Dark Age Ahead. In book after book the challenge is raised: What exactly is it we should be analysing and how should we be doing so? There is an interplay of heuristic and method that we can see in the current analyses of GDP, degrowth, the corporation, sustainability and other concepts that was there in *The Journal of a Plague Year*. By illustrating this link, we demonstrate the value of combining the two research approaches of psychogeography and fictional analysis.

### **3 Use of Fiction in Organisational Research**

Research in the field of Business and Management increasingly includes the study of fiction in order to gain an understanding of real-life phenomena (De Cock, 2010). Rhodes and Brown (2005) trace the use of such material, including novels, poetry, films and television programmes, back to *The Organization Man* (Whyte, 1956) in which in two chapters about "The Organization Man in Fiction" the author refers to popular novels and films. They note this practice as "not main-stream, but certainly present and accounted for." (Rhodes and Brown, 2005:469)

Huczynski and Buchanan (2013) in their popular Organizational Behaviour text book provide examples of novels (and also films) at the end of every chapter to enhance learning in the topic. De Cock and Land (2005) draw complex parallels between the writing of fiction and that of research, which Rhodes and Brown (2005:469) seem to simplify as "fictionality can be seen to be a characteristic of research writing in general". In other words, a story is 'fabricated' (Latour, 1999) from the data to explain a phenomenon. This perspective chimes well with psychogeographical writing in which there is always a conceit of aimlessness and of having collected data on a single walk.

Land and Sliwa (2009), in their introduction to a special edition of the *Journal of Organizational Change* identify Defoe as one of the eighteenth-century originators of the novel. Defoe's earlier novel *Robinson Crusoe* is cited as the model of a work which foregrounds "change in the English system of social organization" (Watt, 1957, cited by Land and Sliwa, 2009). The interest that has been taken in *Robinson Crusoe* by political economists demonstrates that this novel is not only a "representation of social and economic change", and as such, sufficiently "true to life" to act as an appropriate proxy for empirical real-world research but is actually "part and parcel of those changes" (Land and Sliwa, 2009:350; Phillips and Knowles, 2012). Warner (1991:186) combines earlier research on the eighteenth-century novel in which its characterisation is polarised as either carrying "a serious and responsible role in the early modern crisis of secularization" or as being responsible for a "police or domesticating function in the service of a middle-class hegemony". By allowing both, Warner suggests that as the former promotes the reader's "cultural agency" thereby enabling them to "confront and mediate crisis", the latter provides us with a view of "the insidious fashion in which the novel promotes social control". Both of these functions will be seen in *A Journal of the Plague Year*.

De Cock's analysis of the novels of John Berger from a management theory perspective begins with a walk with Berger in London's "financial heart", the "Square Mile", which at the time of the Great Plague was most of the extent of the city (2010:197). Berger's themes are the progress of capitalism and increasing urbanization, and those who suffer as a result (De Cock, 2010:199). Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* is eminently appropriate as fictional data for this project as it is identified as the

“prototype psychogeographical report” (Coverley, 2010:15). It vividly depicts Berger’s themes and the impact of calamity.

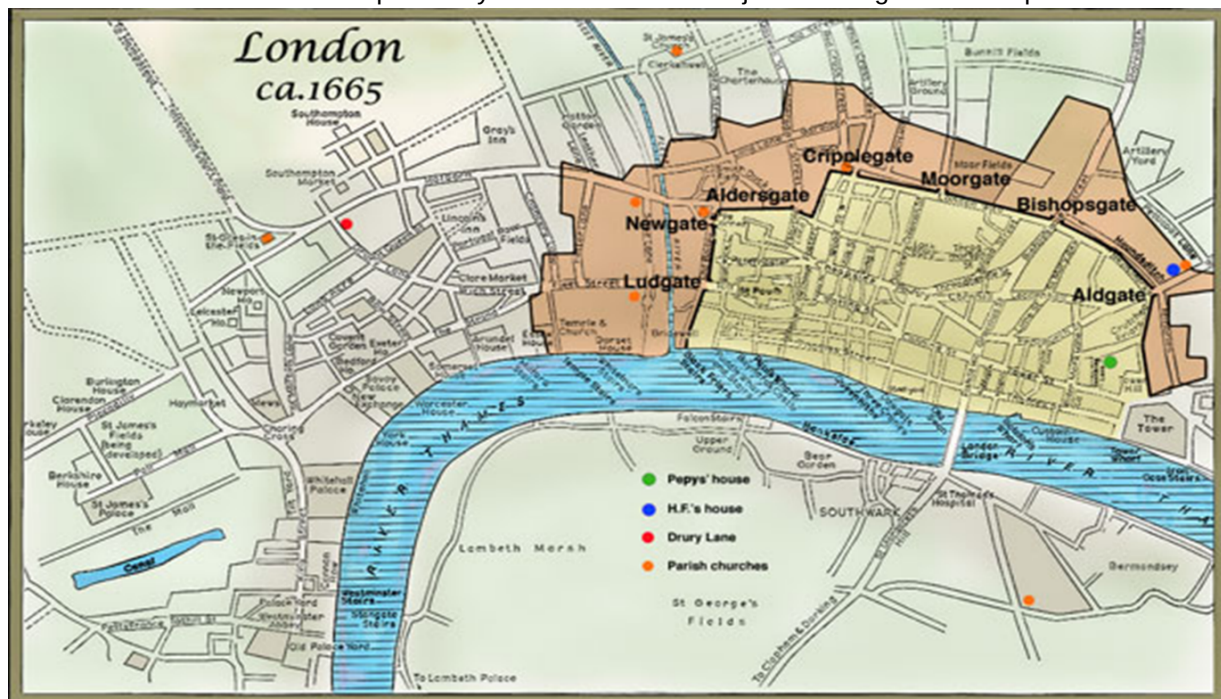
#### 4 The Journal of a Plague Year

There is something eerily contemporary about Defoe’s *A Journal of Plague Year*. Albeit in a language strange to today’s ear, he addresses our modern business and management topics: the different mobility of wealthy and poor when calamity strikes; the dilemma of the damned to stay and protect means but risk losing life, or how to balance the private and the public good; the loss of faith and the maintenance of superstition, and the overriding need for community. All these issues are addressed in scenes recounted in a style of long rambling sentences by H.F., Defoe’s narrator, that reproduce the sense of a *dérive*. We almost believe that it is what it purports to be, a masterful documentary rather than “a cunning work of art, a confidence track of the imagination” (Burgess, 2003:264).

The psychogeographical practice of Defoe’s narrator, H.F., includes not only walking („...walking the Streets and Fields, I cannot omit taking notice what a desolate Place the City was at that Time ...“ p. 98); but also consultation of a number of published sources. He refers to the weekly „Bills of Mortality“ which punctuate the book throughout, providing an objective view of the gravity of the situation (p. 4 and passim) as well as a number of printed artefacts described as “Predictions and Prognostications” (p.22) which he demonstrates as exerting great influence on the public mood.

H.F. describes the details of his own activities and reactions in real streets so that the reader is likely to believe that this is a credible account, that in those circumstances they would collect similar data, and that a city of comparable size and in analogous times would experience such a calamity in a similar way. Again, there is an eerily contemporary sense, as if Defoe were anticipating the current interest in creative non-fiction.

Source: <http://faculty.humanities.uci.edu/bjbecker/PlaguesandPeople/lecture12.html>



Defoe documents the progress of London’s Great Plague of 1665 showing the human response to this calamity which has a very direct bearing on business and management practices. The explicit aim of his narrator H.F. is to provide a text for “those who come after me, if they come to be brought to the same Distress, and to the same Manner of making their Choice and therefore I desire this Account may pass with them, [...] as a Direction to themselves to act by ...” (p. 10). (Capitalisation is as in the 2003 Penguin edition.)

As (he tells us) newspapers were not available at that time, he begins with the rumours of plague having returned to Holland in the autumn of 1664 (p. 3). The historical context is set as a time of a growing London population in peace-time from wars with European neighbours; "... the Joy of the Restoration [of the monarchy, only five years earlier] had brought a vast many families to London." (p. 20.). One of the intentions of those "flock[ing] to London" was "to settle into Business [...] All the old soldiers set up Trades here" (sic, pp. 19-20).

Defoe documents the types of business to be found in London: "Manufacturers, and the like"; "especially in every thing that belong'd to Fashion and Finery"; "no less than an Hundred Thousand Ribband Weavers in and about the City [...] in the parishes of *Shoreditch, Stepney, White-Chapel and Bishopsgate* ..." (sic, p. 20). Businesses supplying food and drink are implied throughout (including "Tipling-Houses" (p. 46)), as well as medical practitioners of various types and places of worship. Then the plague strikes.

The narrative takes us on a *dérive* which informs us about seventeenth-century organisational life. Deaths from the plague begin to be apparent in London from the beginning of 1665. In all the descriptions of behaviour in extremis, what stands out is the ways that the population organise themselves to carry on with "business as usual" as far as possible whilst devising mechanisms to cope with the disaster. H.F. himself is a sadler (p. 10) and his brother has a merchant's business which, like many of the better off, he leaves to make his escape from the plague (p. 84). The effect of the plague on work organisation that is most striking in this account is that it has changed the types of employment available. The evacuation of those who could afford it, together with the fear among those who are left of going out and mixing with others has led to the closure of businesses due to a lack of custom, and consequent high unemployment. "You may be sure, from that Hour, [the beginning of the Plague when all those who had connections outside London retired there] all Trade, except such as related to immediate Subsistence, was as *it were*, at a full Stop. (sic, p. 91). Defoe lists a large variety of entertainments (p. 30) and manufacturing workers, river workers and customs officers who depended on the departed merchants, building trades, seamen (and river men) and ship (and boat) builders, and household servants of all types who have lost their jobs (pp. 92-3). Therefore, many were to die not from the plague itself but from its consequences: poverty, hunger and homelessness.

We, the twenty-first-century reader, recognise the loss of jobs due to both genuine calamities such as terrorist attacks and tsunamis as well as those created by design, such as the Global Financial Crisis and sending jobs to lower wage economies and new technologies reducing the need for human labour. This "crisis" of structural unemployment is "confront[ed] and mediate[d]" by a process of redeployment both intended and incidental (Warner, 1991:186). In place of lost employment, to relieve those "who fell into immediate Distress upon this Occasion" (p. 92), Defoe shows opportunities arising not for interesting and well-paid work but for jobs that would attract only the really desperate, named by Defoe as "Examiners" of the sick, "Watchmen" to ensure that nobody leaves "infected houses", "Searchers" to check corpses for cause of death, "Chirurgeons" to assist Searchers, "Nurse-keepers" (pp. 39-40) "Buryers" (p.61), and "Bearers", who took corpses from houses (p. 99) as well as various other unidentified workers carrying out such necessary tasks as marking the doors of infected houses and digging the plague pits.

Without the new workforce of "Bearers", H.F. tells us, "the Bodies of the dead would have lain above Ground, and have perished and rotted in a dreadful Manner" (p. 99). Yet this was risky work, "for innumerable of the Bearers dy'd of the Distemper, infected by the Bodies they were oblig'd to come so near" (p.99).

The most salient example of the novel's promotion of "social control" is in the depiction of the largest new workforce created by the "kind and gentle Methods" of the Lord Mayor and magistrates to effect structural redeployment by job creation (p.95; Warner, 1991:186). The watchmen guarded houses that were "infected" (i.e. quarantined) or "shut up" (i.e. abandoned by fleeing occupants) on day and night shifts. "This gave opportunity to employ a very great Number of poor Men at a Time" (p. 95). The job of watchman also carried danger, for the as-yet healthy occupants of an infected house were understandably unwilling to be confined with the sick and infectious. A number of watchmen were killed either in revenge for harsh treatment or during escape attempts. Women who had lost their positions as servants were given nursing jobs; H.F.'s comment that "this took off a very great Number of them" is somewhat ambiguous as this may refer again to the "kind and gentle Methods" to relieve the unemployed – or to the great possibility of becoming infected by the patients and dying oneself (p. 95).

As well as publicly organized redeployment, the plague gave rise to opportunities for the criminal entrepreneur. "Quack-operators" (p. 32) offered free advice, which usually included buying their cures, which (H.F. heard) was earning some of them "five Pound a Day by their Physick" at a time when a family of five could live on £13 a year (pp. 32-33; 285 n38). H.F. is more outraged by an even worse "Madness": the market in selling "Charms, Philters, Exorcisms, Amulets" mainly in the form of papers with certain magic or religious words and symbols written on them which profits from the growth of superstition in the hopeless situation (p. 33).

However, there are many examples of public generosity for such were the numbers of those who had lost their jobs that many more would have starved if not for the charity of the rich, including those who had fled London as "large Sums were also collected in the Trading-towns in the remotest Parts of England" (sic, p. 90).

We see work being carried out by unwilling operatives, having been (we assume) hastily planned, yet despite the all-pervading gloom of the high death toll and the evident ineffectiveness of medical treatment, H.F. is very positive about the efficiency of the Bearers and Buryers. The corpses "were always clear'd away, and carry'd off every Night; so that it was never said of *London*, that the living were not able to bury the Dead" (sic, p. 100).

## 5. Conclusions

In this paper we have demonstrated the potential to business and management research of an approach which co-articulates psychogeography and the application of a fictional narrative as data. The novel is seen to inform and influence the reader by depicting the confrontation and mediation of crisis and by demonstrating the merits of social control (Warner, 1991). The scenes depicted from a *dérive* in seventeenth-century, plague-stricken London provide learning about how organisations of today might confront calamity.

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